



The Big Marsh: The Story of a Lost Landscape

Cheri Register

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Under the corn and soybean fields of southern Minnesota lies the memory of vast, age-old wetlands, drained away over the last 130 years in the name of agricultural progress. But not everyone saw wetlands as wasteland. Before 1900, Freeborn County's Big Marsh provided a wealth of resources for the neighboring communities. Families hunted its immense flocks of migrating waterfowl, fished its waters, trapped muskrats and mink, and harvested wood and medicinal plants. As farmland prices rose, however, the value of the land under the water became more attractive to people with capital. While residents fought bitterly, powerful outside investors overrode local opposition and found a way to drain 18,000 acres of wetland at public expense.

Author Cheri Register stumbled upon her great-grandfather's scathing critique of the draining and was intrigued. Following the clues he left, she uncovers the stories of life on the Big Marsh and of the "connivers" who plotted its end: the Minneapolis land developer, his local fixer, an Illinois banker, and the lovelorn local lawyer who did their footwork.

The Big Marsh, an environmental history told from a personal point of view, shows the enduring value of wild places and the importance of the fight to preserve them, both then and now.

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